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ABSTRACT

In fall 1995, a team of three instructors at Central Arizona College offered "As Worlds Collide," a 9-credit learning community combining insights and methodologies from history, social psychology, and communication studies to explore questions of culture and community. The team sought to determine if such a learning community could succeed in a rural community college serving a population of varied students and if it provided sufficient rewards to students and faculty. Forty-seven self-selected students enrolled in the course, which met 2 days a week in 5-hour sessions. Although seminars were the most common form of learner-active instruction used, teams of six or seven students were occasionally formed to present instruction to the class. A "community room" was equipped for the class with advance projection and electronic presentation equipment, while students created their own video and audio materials. Assessment was achieved through the use of a portfolio, in which students accumulated class notes, film response sheets, and seminar discussions. Learning outcomes determined by the team and a student services specialist included the following: (1) the class comfort level allowed for learning; (2) writing skills improved through class discussion; (3) critical thinking improved; and (4) writing skills improved through the use of journals and portfolios. Data on learning community participants at the college are attached. (HAA)

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AS WORLDS COLLIDE

A Central Arizona College Learning Community

Faculty

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1996 David Pierce Work Force Leadership Award Application
IV. Learner Focused Teaching Leadership Award Application

Introduction

WHAT IS A LEARNING COMMUNITY?

A learning community is a multiple credit program in which students join with a group of their peers and a faculty team for a semester of interdisciplinary study. Students and faculty become an interactive community of learners exploring a selected theme in depth, reading and discussing primary sources on the subject. Two questions were posed as Central Arizona College chose to pursue learning communities as a potential teaching approach:

- "Can a learning community succeed in a rural community college serving a population of varied ages, ethnicities, and academic preparedness?"

- "Does a learning community provide sufficient rewards to students and faculty to justify the expense, time, and scheduling challenges?"

Central Arizona College decided to find out. The resulting experiment became a learning experience for the students, the faculty team, the administration, and the campus at large.

Learner-Active Instruction

During the Fall of 1995 a team of three instructors offered a nine credit learning community to self-selecting students at Central Arizona College. The course, entitled "As Worlds Collide," combined insights and methodologies from the disciplines of history, social psychology, and communication studies to explore questions of culture and community. What is culture? How is culture maintained and transmitted? What happens when cultures conflict? Is there a universal pattern to be discerned? Forty seven students enrolled in the course which met twice a week from 8:00 am until 1:15 p.m. Mornings included a variety of activities: work teams developed and delivered informational presentations to the class, guest lecturers or symposium participants brought specialized insights to topics under consideration, there was time in the morning for viewing full-length films without interruption, and there was the occasional lecture. Afternoons were devoted to student seminars: meeting in groups of fifteen, students discussing reading assignments. Instructors were there, but not as leaders or even active participants. Seminar discussions were the most consistent incident of learner-active instruction. During the course of the semester, each seminar group developed into a sophisticated self-guided learning team.

Interpersonal conflicts occurred within the teams; political conflicts occurred around the teams. Students were actively involved in approaching and resolving these conflicts.

Cooperative Learning

Although seminars were the most consistent occasion of learner-active instruction, teams of six or seven students were occasionally formed to present instruction to the class. One such presentation explored the customs and character of a selected ethnicity. Another presented the results of gathering examples of contemporary propaganda. A third constructed and offered an original propaganda campaign. Such presentations required a sustained group effort over an extended period of time. In each case issues of teamwork were considered. This year, in the second offering of this experience, group process journals will require an even more systematic attention to issues of team leadership, conflict resolutions, and problem-solving techniques.

Classroom Research

This Learning Community had the advantage of a collaborative working relationship with a student services specialist who was researching demographic data related to several Learning Communities active at CAC. The results (including two separate learning communities) serve as helpful tools in future curriculum planning (see Attachments A & B).

Additionally, the collaborating researcher has done extensive observations in the Learning Community setting and has assisted faculty by developing useful tools to assess students values and attitudes (see Attachment C).

Another research related activity is the interest of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Clearninghouse in the Project. Inclusion in that database helps "spread the word" about the value of this approach and the specifics of this project (see Attachment D).

Use of Technology

The class spent mornings in the campus "community room" which is equipped with appropriate technology. Students as well as instructors made extensive use of advance projection equipment. An electronic "presenter table" was in the room at all times so students became comfortable with its use and explored its potentials. Students also created their own video and audio tape recordings to include in their presentations.

Student Assessment

Assessment was achieved through the use of a portfolio. In that portfolio each student accumulated class notes, film response sheets, and seminar discussions. At three times during the semester students were required to write a synthesis paper in which they developed an original observation which came from or applied to the continuing dialogue that was the course. It was in the synthesis papers that the students' critical thinking skills were most challenged.

Several learning outcomes were noted by faculty and the student services specialist conducting a related research project:

- Class comfort level allows for learning.
- Writing skills improve through class discussion (open forum).
- The word community encourages the establishment of support systems; bonding occurs at all levels.
- Critical thinking improves.
- Social skills improve through group activities.
- Knowledge and skills transfer to other classes.
- Academic development focuses not on volume but quality of outside class assignments.
- Student recognizes his/her own improvement in academic performance.
- Free speech/awareness of others' values, culture and beliefs is developed.
- A sense of organization and the interrelatedness of learning is developed.
- Writing skills improve through the use personal journals and portfolios.

Organizational and Community Leadership

As a consequence of this experiment in teaching, the three teachers involved have offered a district-wide weekend retreat to report on their findings and encourage their colleagues to develop additional learning communities and cooperative learning activities. Additionally, the team presented their experience to Arizona's first state-wide conference for the promotion of

cooperative learning. Finally, they went to Austin, Texas, to report their findings to National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD).

Conclusion

The following comments from students indicate the value of this learner-active, critical thinking, problem solving approach to teaching and learning:

- "Tangible faculty/student relationship."
- "Learning community is the "spirit of education" through discussion and debate."
- "Intimate climate of the community."
- "Variety of teaching strategies."
- "Relaxed atmosphere."
- "Freedom of speech - invited to challenge instructor."
- "Understanding of students' needs concerning assignments, etc."
- "Recognition of the "total" student, i.e., personal, social, emotional needs which may hinder academic development."
- "Applicability of a discipline's history and theory."
- "I felt like I was packing for a trip, and that I would be gone quite a long time."

One students' more lengthly synopsis communicates the breadth and depth of this experience for her as an individual:

"What is a "Learning Community?" A "Learning Community" is a course in which three disciplines are intermingled with each other and taught together. They offer the student an opportunity to get involved with different perspectives, cultural diversity and to develop intensive critical thinking. My History Professor's enthusiasm for this course sparked my interest. I decided on this course because of it's unique structure. Entitled "As Worlds Collide," the disciplines were Social-Psychology, Communications, and History.

The course work entailed free writing, films with write-ups, lectures, eight books with assigned readings, several group presentations, a group war/tactical game, and synthesis papers on what we were learning at various points during the course.

The instructor's for this course were dynamic, highly motivated, and managed to bring the subject matter together from different disciplines, with diversity and intensive critical thinking. In the morning session we had lectures, films, and guest speakers. In the afternoon session we broke up into three smaller groups and discussed our reading and writing assignments. These were free flowing discussions about our reading, what we got from it or what we didn't understand or agree with. These discussion groups gave us a unique perspective and intense critical thinking on a variety of subjects we studied.

One was a ten move strategic game. Each group, who was assigned a country, organized its own diplomatic team, and began negotiating for world dominance. The metamorphosis that took place over the weeks playing this game was fascinating from a psychological, political, and communications stand point. We used what we learned from the lectures, films, speakers, readings, and most importantly from each other.

Another group project was done on ethnicity. Each groups was given a nationality. We were instructed "to dig into the culture and to come up smelling like the people we were studying." We were to give you a true "feel" for the culture of the people we were representing. We literally immersed ourselves in another culture and shared our learning experiences with the entire class. This was invaluable in learning cultural diversity from the ground up.

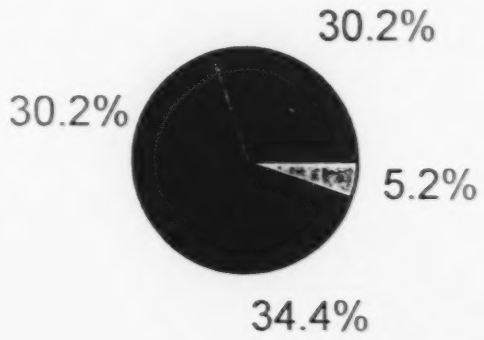
As the weeks passed we found ourselves growing closer as individuals. Rarely if ever do you get that involved with your fellow classmates in college. You go to lectures, labs, and take tests. We got together in and outside of class, to work in more detail on our projects. We all learned something about each other, people in general, and about society's views, controls and constraints on us as individuals.

By the end we all wanted the course to continue another semester; we still had more to learn and share. Any student who takes a Learning Community course is getting so much more out of the course than he ever could have just going to a lecture and lab.

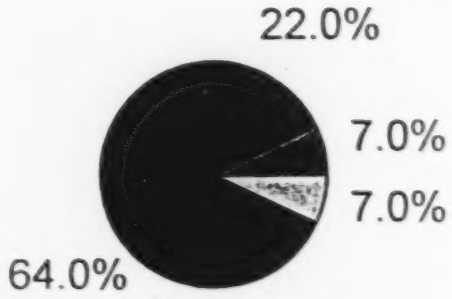
I feel I owe a lot to the three professors who dedicated their time and energy into making this course such a success. I am glad that my college had the foresight to try this program."

Central Arizona College Learning Communities

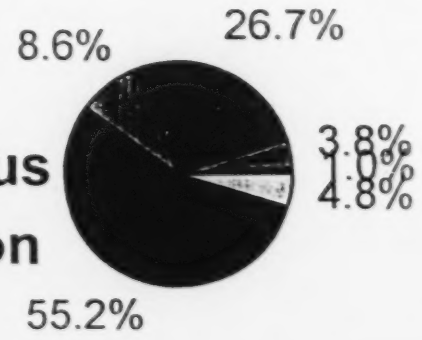
Games People Play



Worlds Collide

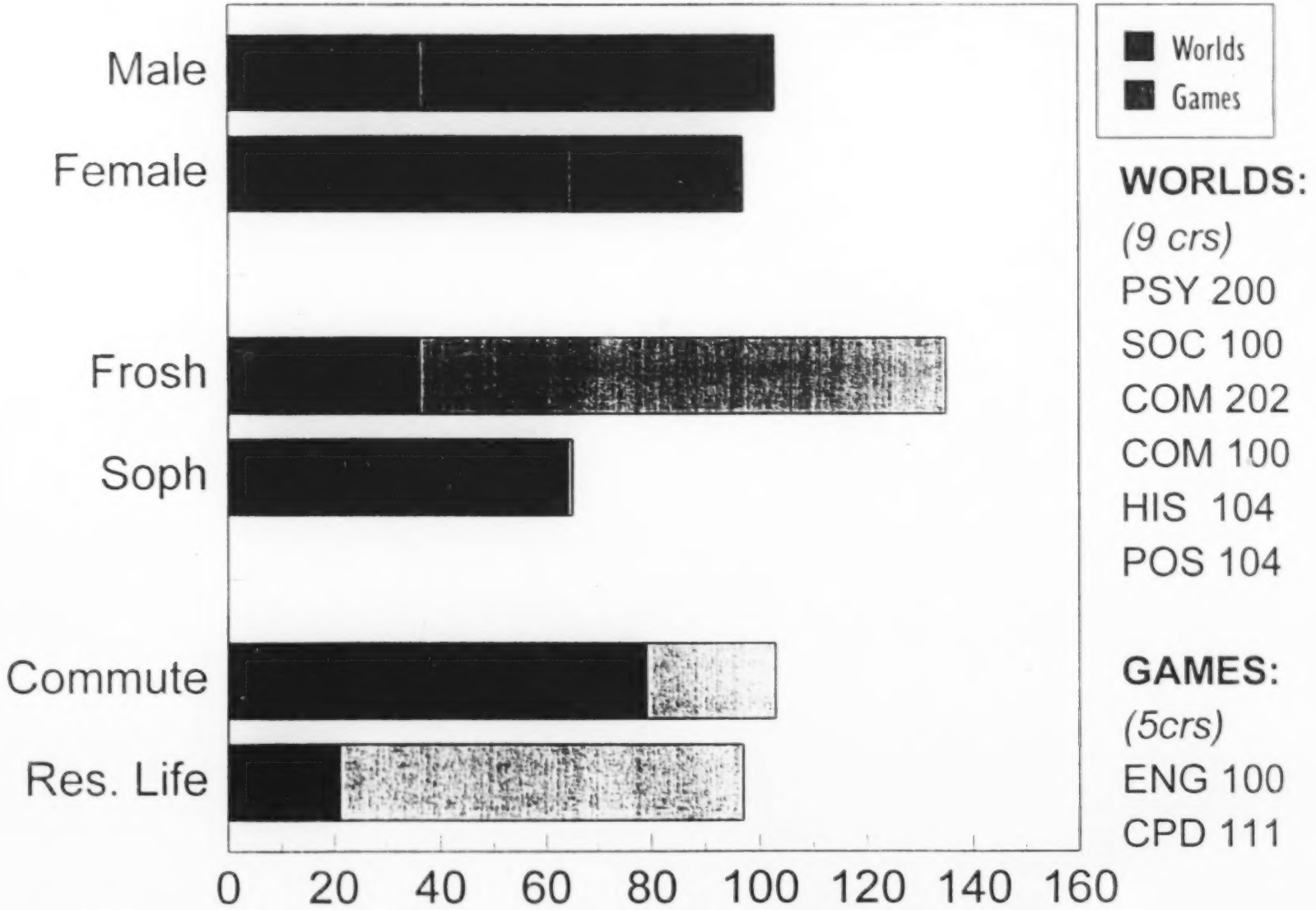


Signal Peak Campus Population



ATTACHMENT - B

Central Arizona College Learning Communities



WORLDS:

(9 crs)

PSY 200

SOC 100

COM 202

COM 100

HIS 104

POS 104

GAMES:

(5crs)

ENG 100

CPD 111

ATTACHMENT - A

STUDENT VALUES & ATTITUDES SURVEY

	Survey Questions Asked	Strongly disagree 5	Disagree 4	Un-decided 3	Agree 2	Strongly agree 1	Total	Percent
1.	I dislike competition							
2.	I have a strong interest in learning							
3.	I enjoy working with others							
4.	I tend to achieve my goals							
5.	I am satisfied with myself							
6.	I have a negative attitude towards school							
7.	I'm working as hard as I should be							
8.	I tend to put off completing things							
9.	I learn a lot from others							
10.	College has lived up to my expectations							
11.	I get sufficient attention from faculty							
12.	My teachers give me lots of feedback							
13.	I have few friends at this school							
14.	Being financially well off is important to me							
15.	Helping others is important to me							
16.	Being better educated for my children is important							

ATTACHMENT - C

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